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ABSTRACT

An adult continuing education course in introductory Spanish is described. In planning the course, special attention was given to making course objectives realistic for the target population; rather than undertake a traditional college-level syllabus, academic and grammar-oriented in nature, the course was designed to provide students with basic communicative skills in Spanish. Grammar instruction is de-emphasized; for example, only the present tense is employed in the textbook used, and no grammar terminology is taught overtly in class. The functional-notional approach was selected as the most appropriate for adult learners. Some students initially resisted this approach, preferring a traditional grammar-oriented one. The once-a-week, 2-hour class and irregular attendance made classroom continuity difficult, and pronunciation was not easy for the adult students to grasp. However, the older learners' creative abilities and thoughtful approach to language learning were found to be instrumental in their acquisition of language skills and confidence. Suggested adjustments for such a course in future would be incorporation of some traditional grammar exercises in the textbook. (MSE)

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EXPERIMENTING WITH ADULT SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A CASE WITH SPANISH LANGUAGE AT NORTHWESTERN HIGH SCHOOL IN PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, MARYLAND

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One of the common complaints of foreign language teachers at the secondary and college levels is that there is not enough time to "cover" the textbook. This is a "valid" complaint when one considers that teachers are generally given a curriculum that must be taught. There is usually little room for innovation and variation. Traditionally, academic foreign language programs have been guided by textbooks and grammatical syllabi because that is the easiest way to define uniformity in course content and, to a certain degree, in instructional methods. Unfortunately, this approach has forced teachers to rush through the text and the syllabus because students will be tested on the same materials at the end of the course in some school districts or university language departments where common final examinations are required. Also, students must be prepared to go on to the next level with comparable "knowledge and preparation".

The outcome of the "cover-it-all-approach" is that foreign language programs have abandoned the goals and objectives so faithfully written on syllabi and lesson plans. In view of the present focus on "real" proficiency in the four language learning modalities (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), there is a need for a major overhauling in curricular design and focus in foreign language program. It is not enough to state that finally the foreign language profession is ready to take proficiency and

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communicative competence seriously. The present awareness of the ineffectiveness of basic language programs demands a greater focus on teaching methodology and instructional materials. Foreign language teachers have long claimed and promised to teach students to communicate in a second language. Unfortunately, however, few high schools or college/university foreign language programs can claim that the majority of students who complete a one or two year requirement has achieved the desired minimal level of communicative ability in the target language.

Characteristically, first year academic foreign language programs in the United States present too much information in a very limited time. As Dorothy James (1984) pointed out, college foreign language programs try to achieve in "77 hours [2 semesters of 14 weeks with 3 class sessions of 55 minutes] what commercial or governmental language schools such as the Foreign Service Institute or the Defense Language School purport to do in a minimum of 240 hours" (p. 33). The title of James' article, "Toward Realistic Objectives in Foreign Language Teaching", is essentially the focus of this paper. Generally, traditional foreign language programs have treated foreign language learning as a scientific and purely academic subject. In such programs, success in a foreign language was measured by the ability to manipulate grammatical items on a paper/pencil test. Often, only the truly "grammatically-oriented" learners excel in such programs. It should be pointed out that due to the present structure of academic foreign language programs. Others become frustrated and overwhelmed with the unrealistic goals

and expectations of the language program. These learners/students more than often abandon their foreign language studies forever.

In response to the foregoing observations, a colleague, Terry L. Collier, who has taught Spanish on the college level and who has also dedicated several years of his professional career to using his language skills in translation and escort interpreting, and I decided to write an Introductory Spanish language text which would respond to the current goal of teaching for proficiency. The first step was to discuss in detail what we felt was the major shortcomings of academic foreign language programs. We agreed that the "failure" of these programs was largely due to the approach and format used in the traditional four-skills generic language text. In the text, entitled Core Spanish, we aimed to offer to the beginning student a practical and realistic approach to learning the basics of the Spanish language. With the text, we hoped to minimize some of the problems in learning and teaching beginning Spanish by providing a "digestible package", which would give students the necessary time to develop successful communicative skills in Spanish while gaining self-confidence.

In addition to the unrealistic amount of information given to students in the first year program, the emphasis on the learning and usage of English language grammar terminology and linguistic jargon has contributed to the "problems" associated with foreign language teaching and learning in the United States. Sophie Jeffries (1983) noted that "most beginning language textbooks are based on certain basic assumptions about the nature of the

student's knowledge of English" (p. 385). Jeffries went on to explain that in most "English curricula explicit grammar analysis has been replaced by practical exercises... thus, we can no longer fairly expect that students will have mastered the vocabulary of traditional grammar analysis before they begin second language study" (p. 385). Implicit in Jeffries' message is that the foreign language profession is disadvantaging students by demanding as a prerequisite a working knowledge of terminology that they probably never learned. Generally, the language of instruction is English when teaching grammar, and teachers "seem to try hard to fit oral work in the target language as well as reading and translation practice around their grammar teaching" (James, 1984). Heidi Byrnes (1984) wrote that "considering that most language teachers have strong humanistic leanings, it is surprising that we often treat language as a formal system" (p. 79).

To alleviate the burden of trying to teach the entire Spanish grammar in "77" hours, we decided to reduce the grammar coverage, in Core Spanish, to only what, we felt, were the essentials for the development of basic communicative skills. One notable and radical example is that only the present tense of verbs is presented in the text. Students must be given the opportunity to externalize vocabulary and rules. Using the basic concepts of ACTFL/ETS proficiency guidelines, we focused on novice level speech behavior. Also, based on our teaching experience, we knew that generally after a year of study, our students were rarely able to utter any functional sentence in the target language. Why, then,

continue to fight a useless battle? The following observations about Core Spanish will point out and define the approach that we have attempted. I will admit that we are not totally sure of all of the successes or failures of the text at this point because it has had rather limited use. Some 500 copies have been sold to date. At any rate, in Core Spanish, the present tense forms of all the verbs included are presented as vocabulary items along with the various English meanings and usage.

Also, whenever appropriate, the command forms of the verbs are presented with present tense. This was done because we feel that "giving orders" and "maneuvering one's environment" are essential in the developmental stages of communicative competence. It was extremely difficult to decide which vocabulary items should be included in the text. We simply had to use our judgement by focusing on what one needs to satisfy her/his basic human and social needs. Also, we relied heavily on our own experiences as we began the study of a second language. (Every textbook writer should consider that!) In the text, traditional grammar terminology was avoided as much as possible because, as I have pointed out, the terminology often creates stumbling blocks to learning, and takes away from the time needed for focusing on second language proficiency.

While we suggested that the text be used in academic programs, we have only used it in adult continuing education programs. Below, I shall describe the program. Following that, I shall continue with a discussion of some of the problems and

"successes" with the approach and the text. The text was used continuously in the Prince George's program for about four years. In the fall of 1986, I agreed to teach Spanish to a class of twenty adults whose ages ranged from 25 to 65. About sixty percent (60%) of the students stated that they "needed Spanish on the job" as their reason for taking the course. The remaining 40 percent cited various reasons for taking the course. Among the most frequent were travel and self-enhancement. About fifty percent (50%) of the enrollees had taken at least one course in Spanish either in high school, college or in a community organization. None of them had studied in a commercial language school. The other fifty percent (50%) had had no formal training in Spanish, but had been exposed to the Spanish language through work, travel, and/or Spanish-speaking friends or spouses.

The primary desire of each student was to learn to speak and understand Spanish. They felt that reading and writing were important, but they unanimously expressed that they would rather focus on speaking. In fact, most of the students felt that they had a "good" reading knowledge of Spanish. Others stated that they could write the language with some ease. I later learned that both the former and the latter claims were basically valid ones. Those who had previous study had been exposed to the grammar-translation or the audio-lingual method, and seemed to have mastered what was expected of them in those approaches. However, as they pointed out, they could not speak. There was one student whom I jokingly referred to as the "prima donna" of the audio-lingual method. This

student, who was about thirty-five years old, had learned hundreds of words and phrases by rote memorization, and used them in class as often as she could. As I listened, I realized that the audio-lingual method has its merits, and that, if the very same student were taught when, how, and where to use the hundreds statements that she had memorized, she would be on her way to real "communicative" ability.

The question of "useability" and function became my primary goal for the course. I realized that adult learners are at times unsuccessful in second language acquisition not because of their inability to grasp new language rules and systems, but because of the lack of innovations by the teacher and the absence of meaningful contexts and situations. Adult learners want to be able to function verbally in the second language well enough to satisfy their immediate "situational" needs (Carlton, 1983). Sally Rehorick (1983) noted that the communicative competence (functional/notional) approach is the logical and natural approach for adult second language learners. Citing Snow and Hoefnagel-Hole and Krashen and Selinger, Rehorick reiterated that certain mental abilities (general cognitive ability, second and native language ability, perception, imitation, and social learning) increase with age. Adult educators must be aware of and take advantage of the differences between learning strategies and abilities in children and adults. It is nevertheless true that many adults are less willing and perhaps less "able", when compared to children, to accept new ways of thinking and behaving. This becomes an inherent

problem in adult education. I shall return to this point below.

In an effort to teach the course in a functional/notional format, every effort was made to allow students to engage in an activity which simulated real life. Students were always informed that they should try to utter simple statements in the beginning stages because attempting to express themselves with the same level of sophistication as they do in their native language would cause frustration. Simplicity is the underlining principle in the approach. As indicated, only the present tense was presented in the course. Some of the students were eager to learn other verbal tenses in Spanish, however. I informed them that I was going to insure that they master the present tense. I proceeded to explain the versatility of the present tense in Spanish, and they seemed appalled. Interestingly, I discovered that many of the students came to the class with the notion that the present tense is not used very much in spoken Spanish. My interpretation of that misunderstanding was that those students who had studied the language previously remembered that they had spent only ten or less class hours on the present tense. They had been rushed into the past and other tenses, and never returned to the present tense. At the end of the course, the present tense quickly had become a thing of the past!

I should point out that some students at the beginning of the course questioned their ability to perform in a functional/notional approach, and seemed to have preferred a more traditional approach. They did not realize that they had in fact

requested a non-traditional approach through their reasons for taking the course and their descriptions of what they did not like about their previous academic experiences in Spanish. Some students, generally those who were teachers themselves, were quite familiar with traditional grammar terminology, others indicated that they have been away from school so long that they could not remember the exact meanings of terms such as pronoun, adverb, participle, gerund and the like. Generally, the students appreciated my effort to avoid these terms in the presentation of the lesson. They also commented on the readability of the text Core Spanish. They stated that for the first time, they could actually read a language text on their own and understand how the language works. As a traditionally trained teacher, it was and still is very difficult for me to conduct a class without using or making reference to traditional grammar terminology, but I have learned to control that better after several years of working with older adult learners who, unlike college students, do not accept change or any deviations from the norm in the middle of the semester. In other words, they held me to the goals, approaches, and philosophy as outlined in the course syllabus. Once, in class I said to the students that the form "hablado" (spoken) is a past participle. One of the students quickly retorted: "You can not use that kind of language in here".

Among some of the other problems in adult continuing education in the foreign language is the lack of time. Generally, these courses are held one night per week for two hours as was the

case in Prince George's. It is extremely difficult to maintain continuity and coherency in student learning. Also, even though the adults enrolled were highly motivated, many of them failed to come to class regularly because of "problems on the job or at home." Often, they came to class when they are very tired after having worked all day. The amount of material that can be successfully and effectively presented was quite limited. Some of the students still found the amount of information to be overwhelming. Again, we must keep in mind that learning a second language requires special skills, and many of these skills have not been used by the adult learner in many years. The teacher must, in a sense, reteach the skills of analyzing and conceptualizing with regard to second language learning. Adults tend to overanalyze and overgeneralize about the language because they have been taught to do this in other disciplines. They often found it frustrating when they realized that the same principles of "scientific analysis" can not always be applied to language studies. To combat this, I never refer to a verb as irregular, for example, because I have found that in doing so, adult students tend to search for irregularities in all the verbs that are presented afterwards. While it is good that they are perceptive and aware of irregular verbs, it becomes a hindrance in developing speaking skills, because when the student thinks that a verb is irregular and is not sure, they generally avoid it. Adults are not the risk takers that children are. For fear of being ridiculed, adults generally tend to keep quiet, if they are not sure of an answer.

Teaching pronunciation has been one of the most difficult tasks in dealing with adult learners. I consistently indicate to them that my goal is not to train them to speak like natives, but to understand and be understood by natives. I have found that every class has to begin with pronunciation drills in the traditional audio-lingual format. Many students, especially those who are beyond the age of fifty, have "fossilized" in both English and Spanish. I made use of the tape recorder so that they record their voices to try to hear how their sounds differ from those of Spanish. They often can not make the distinction. In addition, I have used exercises on minimal pairs in English and Spanish to help them "hear" the difference in sounds. Younger learners tend to grasp the sound system of a second language with greater facility.

I have been, however, quite impressed and pleased with the creative abilities of the adult learners. Because of their longer and varied life experiences, they tend to be quicker than younger students in providing good, thoughtful answers and writing and "speaking" very creative short compositions. Although, reading and writing were not the primary focus in the course, I insisted that the students try to further develop their skills in those areas because I believe that all language skills--receptive and productive--enhance each other. The students are now convinced of this. To enhance reading skills, I asked students to bring into class documents that they would like to be able to read in Spanish. One might be surprised, maybe not, at what they brought to me. Many of them brought very personal letters from acquaintances from

travelling in Spanish-speaking countries. Some brought in "Reader Digest" articles, medical charts in Spanish, business reports from Latin America, to name only a few. One student brought a message written on a napkin by a hispanic admirer in a restaurant. Here, the message is that foreign language teachers must allow students to make some choices in their classroom activities. The students' reading comprehension ability was greatly enhanced through the personalized classroom activities.

The effectiveness of the adult learning experience depends largely on the professional interaction between the adult educator and his "clients". The role of the teacher is to facilitate the development of the adults according to their needs and goals. The educator must recognize individual differences in adults, must know adults, their backgrounds, their roles in occupation, families, and community life. Also, the adult educator must know and believe that adult learners can learn most things if given adequate time and attention. The educator must set realistic goals and create effective learning packages to meet the needs of the learners. Such was our approach in the program. I feel that the enrollees left the course with a sense of accomplishment and confidence. While some of them performed very well in all aspects of the course; others did not advance very much, but I feel certain that all can speak enough Spanish to handle their daily activities in a Spanish-speaking environment.

Regarding the text, Core Spanish, I have concluded that any subsequent editions would include a few more "traditional-type"

grammatical exercises. Adults seem to enjoy working with fill-in-the-blank, multiple choice, true/false exercises. My experience revealed, however, that they also enjoyed working with the "communicative-oriented" exercises, but we must keep in mind that the adults have been "programmed" to respond to the traditional exercises. It is extremely important that we recognize that we can not throw out all of the old for the new. Innovations should always eclectic.

There are major implications for language educators on the secondary and post secondary levels. Controlling the amount of information presented in the class is perhaps the most important lesson that I learned as a teacher. I have become even more convinced that our goals and expectations in foreign language instruction are far too unrealistic. Our goals have forced the profession to defeat its own purpose. We generally do not teach students to communicate or to prepare them to read a variety of literature in the target language. My experience, however, informs me that most contemporary students of foreign/second languages--in academic or non-academic programs--wish to perfect basic speaking skills. My concluding admonition is: let's teach our students to communicate orally. This is what they really want!

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